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OAS: General Assembly Meeting in Chile

The venerable but ineffective Organization of American States does not receive much concrete backing or even continuing interest from its 24 member states—in spite of efforts by Secretary General Orfila to turn its lumbering bureaucracy into a responsive and dynamic staff.

There is, nevertheless, considerable interest in the next meeting of the OAS General Assembly, which opens in Santiago, Chile, on Friday and is likely to last two weeks. Some members view the session as an opportunity to gauge the state of relations between the US and Latin America, a relationship most Latin feel has been neglected by Washington.

Even more interest will focus on the conference hosts. It will be a chance for the many delegates, observers, and media representatives to take a close look at Chile, which has become the pariah of the hemisphere. Whether this special attention will be helpful to Chile—or

to the OAS, which is also in dire need of a boost—is questionable.

The Chileans hope for an amicable, frictionless display of inter-American cooperation. Despite the routine nature of the formal agenda, however, and despite agreements to limit the private meetings among foreign ministers to informal, businesslike procedures, hazards abound. Mexico is boycotting the conference because of the venue, and legislators in Costa Rica and Venezuela have advised their governments to do the same.

Domestic opponents of the Chilean government might try to provoke incidents to embarrass President Pinochet during the meetings. Some of his security measures could play into their hands. The curfew, special documentation procedures for conference delegates and journalists, and possible restrictions on what journalists may cover are likely to guarantee the press a generally bad press.

A number of issues may place countries

or blocs of countries in conflict:

- OAS reform and the Panama Canal, both on the agenda as carryover status reports, are touchy issues which some delegates may decide to raise for immediate discussion.
- There are rumors that one or more governments might re-introduce the Cuban problem, a formerly

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dividing issue that has been revived by Cuba's African adventures. A recent round of discussions among Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Argentina about the need to strengthen the inter-American security system lends substance to these rumors.

• Discussions of the US Trade Act of 1974 may broaden the criticism of the US role vis-a-vis the developing countries already expressed by Brazil and Venezuela in other forums. Latin leaders doubt that the US wishes to be helpful to the region and question any administration's ability to follow through on commitments in the face of congressional resistance.

• The Commonwealth island states of the Caribbean may make an issue of the Latin countries' wariness about admitting Guyana, Belize, and emerging island mini-states that would further anglicize the OAS.

• Accounts of brutality toward dissidents by a number of member states will induce others to take a strong stand opposing such abuses.

To a large degree, the mood of inter-American gatherings depends on the momentary state of the region's mercurial relations with the US. Notwithstanding the many divisions within the Latin-Caribbean bloc, its members agree on the need for cohesiveness in dealing with the US. How the bloc reacts to various US positions at the conference will largely determine the tone and utility of the General Assembly.

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